

NORTH BRUNSWICK NBM MAGAZINE

TheNBM.com

Spring 2009

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BALD HEAD ISLAND

Car-Free & Care-Free

Complimentary





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across the county

Judge Ola M. Lewis

A Passion for Public Service

STORY BY
BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
WENDY HUNT

Opposite: Resident Superior Court Judge Ola M. Lewis serves Brunswick County not only on the bench in Judicial District 13 B, but also as a community volunteer.

Judge

Ola M. Lewis, of Boiling Springs Lake, has been breaking ground her entire career. She's been the youngest North Carolina District Court Judge (1993) and North Carolina Special District Court Judge (2000), the first female African-American District Court Judge in North Carolina, and one of only two (not the first, but a rarefied position nonetheless) female African-American Superior Court Judges in North Carolina.

All of this carries some weighty expectations: Can you succeed while breaking new ground? How will you leave your mark? How do you stay true to yourself, your career and your community?

"First and foremost," Judge Lewis says, "It's not about me. I am a servant of the people."

She means it in more than one way. Resident Superior Court Judge is an elected position, so she serves her constituents the same as any other elected official, but being a judge means performing a valuable service for her community through a fair and just vision of the law.

"I have a passion for rendering effective public service through this office," she says. "We're trying new things to better serve Brunswick County."

One of the new things Judge Lewis is trying is night court. When she mentioned this, I immediately went to the 1980s sit-com, and then she swept that thought right out of my head. It isn't like the sit-com at all.

"Night court is a problem solving court. It provides an opportunity for students and those who work or whose circumstances prohibit them from attending a hearing during the day to dispose of their matters in the evening," says Judge Lewis.

The courts are less crowded during the day; lawyers who may have to be in several different courts in the span of one day can serve their clients better; and it allows people with work, school or family responsibilities to be able to attend to their legal matters in the evening. Right now, it is on a trial

basis (only one night court plea session per month), but Judge Lewis hopes to expand the practice as its popularity grows.

Another innovative program is the Drug Treatment Court (DTC). Judge Lewis works with a team that screens eligible individuals for participation in the DTC program.

"Low-level, nonviolent felons are eligible," she says. "No one with a history of any sort of violence is eligible." Those who qualify for the program go through a screening process and, upon successful completion, enter the DTC program. During the DTC program, Lewis explains that "those who need treatment for drug [and alcohol] addictions will receive treatment. Educational and vocational training opportunities are provided to those who need it. Those who need mentoring will receive a 'big brother or big sister'. Local clergy members have volunteered to provide faith-based support to the DTC participants who seek the same."

Judge Lewis and her DTC Team hope this program will provide true rehabilitation and reformation for its participants. So far, DTC programs have proven successful on a national and local level, a trend they hope will hold true.

Judge Lewis's career began in 1990 when she was admitted to the North Carolina Bar Association after graduating from North Carolina Central University School of Law. During and immediately following law school, she served as Law Clerk for the Honorable Daniel T. Blue, Jr. (the first African-American Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives) in the firm of Thigpen, Blue, Stephens and Fellers in Raleigh. From 1991 to 1993 she acted as Assistant District Attorney in the 13th Prosecutorial District (Brunswick, Bladen and Columbus counties).

In 1993, the Honorable James B. Hunt, Jr. appointed her District Court Judge, then Special Superior Court Judge in 2000 (the youngest to serve in those offices). In 2002 she won a race for Resident Superior Court Judge for the 13th District against two incumbent judges. In 2003 she became Senior Resident Superior Court Judge of Judicial District 13 B after District 13 was split into two sections — 13 A and 13 B — as a result of Brunswick County's population growth.

With the population of Brunswick County booming, the law enforcement and justice system face new challenges and burdens spurned by the growth. As Sheriff Ingram and his

“...She's a trailblazer, but not one you'd call reckless. Judge Lewis is a forward-thinking, problem-solving, fair-handed, community-minded woman, and we're lucky to have her dispensing justice on our behalf here in Brunswick County.”

deputies tackle criminal problems and pass them on to the court system, civil cases enter the courts in ever-increasing numbers. Judge Lewis and those who work with her in District 13 B hope to make the court system easier for the citizens of Brunswick County to navigate.

“Our new magistrate court system allows lawyers and non-lawyers to walk in at their convenience to handle simple infractions before a magistrate,” Judge Lewis says, adding that with the financial crisis as it is, she and other leaders like her must “provide cutting-edge justice on a shoe-string budget.”

By remembering it’s not about her, Judge Lewis is able to stay grounded. She says her parents, both lifelong educators and enthusiastic advocates for their daughter’s career, taught her a lot of what she uses now to keep herself humble. Faith, family and a focus on what is fair and just are a few of the lessons she took from her parents.

She cites her uncle, Jason Parker, a prosecutor in Catawba County, as an influencing factor in her decision to go to law school.

“His stories of ‘putting the bad guy away’ coupled with my father’s opposition to my moving to New York, weighed very heavy in my decision to go to law school,” she says. “I wanted to get my MBA and take Wall Street by storm, and when the Bull Market was running I told my dad that I could have been a gazillionaire if I had gone to New York. With the way things are now, though, I’m glad I’m here helping my community.”

Judge Lewis does help the community, and not just from the bench. She does a lot of public speaking to school and civic groups (and admits to being “a bit of a ham”). As a member of the Southport/Oak Island Kiwanis Club, she is involved with their community



Above: Judge Lewis hopes to make the court system easier for the citizens of Brunswick County to navigate.

outreach and service activities. In her position as Trustee with Communities in Schools, she is able to help impact thousands of students a year (she has four interns in her office, all from area high schools). Her activities with the North Carolina Bar Association BarCARES group helps provide cost-free assistance and solution-oriented counseling to those in need (more information at www.ncbar.org/about/barCARES). As a Board Member of the Boys and Girls Home, she helps children in need. And as a Board Member of the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, she helps preserve and protect one of our greatest resources here in southeastern North Carolina — our shoreline, forests and marshes.

While not a self-described outdoorswoman, Judge Lewis said her father instilled a love and respect for the outdoors in her, prompting her to work with the Coastal Land Trust. She said her husband wants to go kayaking in the spring and, even though

they’ve never kayaked, that it certainly would be a great way to gain a new appreciation for Brunswick County. Maybe spring will find the Lewises in a kayak on Bald Head creek, watching for dolphins and osprey. Maybe they can fit it in between the court schedule, the board meetings and service work and the long road of preparation for her 2010 re-election campaign (with a laugh she says, “Even though it’s early, ‘In 2010 we’ll do it again’ has become a sort of unofficial slogan around the house already.”).

She’s the woman to do it. She could administer justice fairly, kayak with her husband, begin planning a re-election campaign and stay committed to her community. She’s a trailblazer, but not one you’d call reckless. Judge Lewis is a forward-thinking, problem-solving, fair-handed, community-minded woman, and we’re lucky to have her dispensing justice on our behalf here in Brunswick County. Sorry Wall Street, we need her here. ■